7: Thompson--374 J-4 (no date) 1937 Laotians
116, 306, 341, 532

"The seventeenth century was an era of peace that permitted the Laotian arts to flourish. The insouciance, which is a Laotian characteristic, explains the fragility of their innumerable monuments. In the South, Khmer influence predominates; in the North, Burmese. Under this double aegis temples, libraries, and reliquaries have been built by the Laotians without originality but always with grace and elegance. The pitiless tropical vegetation has strangled almost all of them: even the Vat Prakeo, which the French have tried to save, seems doomed to destruction. The wood sculpture is of gigantic proportions and fashioned in the expressionless attitude of the Buddhist liturgy. The painting, which consists of frescoes in the pagodas, was the work of foreign artists of whom the Laotians were only the pupils. It is in jewellery and the working of precious metals that the Laotians have shown their most inventive artistry. Like all Far Eastern peoples they are very clever at basketry and weaving."

The roof, the greater part of which still existed when Pavie went to Vientiane, has since collapsed and the two colossal statues of Buddha which sit on the abandoned altar remain exposed to the elements. Even as it is this grandiose ruin is wonderfully allied to the natural vegetation which holds it in its grasp and one cannot, without some emotion, evoke before it the past splendor of the kingdom of Lan-Xang. 175• 172 346 532

But the capital accomplishment of Setthitharath is the That-Luong, located about two kilometers away from the city. It is doubtless also the masterpiece of this Laotian architecture which has no powers of endurance but which cannot be denied grace and elegance. Miraculously spared by the Siamese at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the That-Luong was overthrown in 1873 by the Yunnanese pirates and partly restored, in rather a clumsy manner, in 1897-1898. /341/

This pyramidal edifice, called the "plume of the world" by its founder, was the "reliquary of the kingdom" and is still a highly frequented center of pilgrimage. A stele commemorating its erection bears /85/ the date 1566, and according to legend the original that was built about the eleventh century on one of Buddha's hairs.

The first enclosure, which has today crumbled away, is almost confused with the large group of ruined temples which surrounds it. It was formed by an open cloister which was colored with frescoes and in which the faithful and the priests assembled. The second enclosure is formed by a ledge along which runs a garland of bulging ornaments. "One would be tempted to call them the petals of a gigantic lotus bloom on the point of opening. Heavy pedestals covered with inscriptions support thirty-four slender pinnacles. Leaning on these pedestals as on buttresses, the mass on which the pyramid is set begins to deploy its curves and the pyramid itself springs from a sheaf of broad leaves, like the stem of a plant. . . . It once sparkled with gold applied on a lead base, shreds of which can still be seen" (1).

1. De Carne, ibid. /Voyage en Indochine et dans l'Empire chinois. Paris, 1872./, quoted by Aymonier, Voyage dans le Laos. See below, Laotian Architecture, p. 124.

First Burmese invasion (1563-1565). Solidly entrenched in his new capital, Setthathirath waited to see what the turn of events would be. /86/ He did not have long to wait, for Bureng-Naung 643• 648• 726

545 /177/ and a barb of satire are mingled with the ancient traditions." (L. de Reinach, op. cit. /Le Laos, posthumous edition, Paris, 1911/, p. 191.)

341 346 172 /177/ The other arts: architecture. Carefree artists: this is what the Laotians seem to have been throughout the ages. And this is what explains the extreme fragility of the innumerable monuments with which they adorned their land and which the pitiless tropical vegetation is today strangling for the most part. Under the Kmer influence in the south and the Burmese in /125/ the north they built temples, chapels, pagoda-libraries, and reliquaries in the shape of "lotus blossoms" or pyramids or cones which were without any originality of their own but almost always charming in the grace, prettiness and elegance of their details. The reigning princes, from Fa-Ngoun to Souligna, were all great builders of temples, but if we except three or four edifices in Luang-Prabang, a few pagodas and chapels, the That-Luong in Vientiane and the Vat Sisaket which is only a century old, practically nothing is left of this abundant flowering (1).

1. There can be no question here of the important monastery of Vat-Phou (Bassac), which is really Kmer and belongs in some way to the Angkor group.

Everywhere in Laos one encounters impressive ruins of brick pagodas which were clumsily built but in which the plaster which covered them still frames the openings with many-colored ornaments and exquisite arabesques. For several years the French have tried, albeit somewhat tardily, to save the chief of these mutilated vestiges of an Edenic past from total destruction. Even the Vat Prakeo itself is today, alas! irrevocably destined to final disintegration.

"More fragile still (was) the style of building /126/ in wood which may well have yielded the most beautiful of the country's achievements. One of the most interesting of these exists today only in the memory which was recorded by a drawing of Delaporte at the time of the expedition of Doudart de Lagree... This was a pagoda located in the vicinity of Luang-Prabang... its form was highly individual, and reminds one of a feeding trough or a bread-pan. Delaporte compares it to an Oriental tomb. Rectangular in shape, its walls flared out up to the first roof. The latter was surmounted by a second recessed story which flared out again to support a second richly ornamented roof..."

"The wooden panels which formed the walls, the corbels, and 341
the beams were all carved with great delicacy. This pagoda was 346
as pretty in the fineness of its details as it was elegant in its gen- 172
eral lines.

"But nothing is left of it" (1).

1. Cf. G. Maspero, L'Indochine /Un empire colonial francais: l'Indochine. Paris, 1929-1930/, p. 186.

Sculpture. For these sanctuaries, the Laotians made hordes of 532
statues out of stone, brick, and especially bronze, which were 175
wholly or partly covered with gold. Of the latter, which were al-
ways molded from wax models, some attained gigantic size. /127/
All of them strike the various attitudes of the Buddhist liturgy. The
bodies are sketchily draped and may be seated, standing, walking
or lying down, their arms outspread. The faces are surmounted by
a sort of tiara and are frozen in a hieratic smile which is not very
expressive and seldom varies.

Painting. As for the fresco paintings which brighten the walls
of certain pagodas, they are not of any special interest. Most of /177/
them were "primarily the work of Burmese, Cambodians or Chinese
of whom the native artists (were only) the pupils" (1).

1. Cf. L. de Reinach, op. cit. /Le Laos, posthumous edition, Paris, 1911/, p. 342.

The art of the gold and silver smith. On the other hand, the 326
Laotian jewelers and silversmiths knew and still know, with only
the most meager of tools, how to work gold and silver admirably--
primarily silver--and how to chase and engrave it. Their motifs
show an attractive decorative invention, and it is chiefly in this
"minor art" which borders on small-scale industry that we find the
most original manifestations of old-time Laotian life /128/ --
betel services, vases, cups, sword and dagger hilts; bracelets,
necklaces, rings, headpins, earrings, etc.

Basketwork and weaving. Finally, "like all the peoples of the 285
Far East, the Laotians are skilled in all kinds of basketwork. A 531
very pretty object which seems to be peculiar to this land is the
small basket for women in which the basketwork is covered with

149: Reinach--175 G-3 (no date) 1901 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8
Tribal Tai 341

Building materials, interior arrangement and furniture in Thai houses do not differ in any significant way from what we have described in connection with the Laotians.

Births. Like the Laotian women, Thai women generally give birth to children with the greatest ease, and the ceremonies accompanying births are identical. 844

Marriages. Betrothals generally take place among the Thais after the farming work is over, in December or January, during the cold season. Sheds are built in the villages. Fires are laid there and the marriageable girls install themselves there with a spinning wheel, reel or cotton gin to keep them busy and prevent them from losing countenance. The young men come and join them and exchange declarations, compliments, betel quids and cigarettes with them. There it is that promises of marriage are made, which are followed by a request to the girl's parents when she gives her lover permission to do so. 584

A few days later, during a banquet which takes place in the girl's house, the engagement is announced and the young [236] people are then free to see one another and come and go together at all hours and in all places.

The marriage is not celebrated until several months after the betrothal unless traces of pregnancy are evident in the engaged girl, in which case the marriage takes place at once.

The ceremony is much simpler than among the Laotians, but it is followed by a series of banquets which succeed one another for several days and at which great quantities of rice brandy and rice beer are consumed. 585

The groom comes to live in his wife's room on his wedding day. He is supposed to stay in the home of his in-laws for eight years (only three years in some regions) and share in their work. 591

Adultery. Divorce. "Cases of adultery are extremely rare. When such an eventuality does occur, the man is condemned to a fine of seven bars of silver (about 260 francs) and the woman to a fine of six bars of the same metal (about 225 francs). Half of these sums is awarded to the judges and the other half to the husband, who may then either take back or repudiate his unfaithful wife. 586 684

"In the latter case, the unfaithful wife generally marries her accomplice.

"Divorce is rarer, but just as easy among the Thais as among 586

149: Reinach--247 G-3 (no date) 1901 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8

"What makes everything easy and is used for everything is this hollow wood, at once so solid and so light, the incomparable bamboo. In France we see it only in the form of pleasant but useless little articles of furniture. Here bamboo is sufficient to every task. It provides the whole house, frame as well as walls. The inner walls and floors are made of matted bamboo lathwork. Yet such a house, with its furniture, bed, tables, various accessories and its luxury objects, if you are a person of refinement, can be improvised for you in a space of two hours wherever you want.

"Has a bridge been washed out? In two hours, thanks to this wood which is easy to manage and to work, men will have made a new bridge. One is especially struck, at the beginning of this life which is so free and, more than any other, independent of men and things, by the great simplicity and ingenuity of all the procedures. Objects are rudimentary but practical, easy to make, soon ready and simple to repair. Everyone knows how to build ordinary furnishings, and no interruptions are caused here as they are when even the slightest damage occurs to one of our highly developed utensils, which only a specialist knows how to repair.

"A bamboo tube is a safe place for your maps and papers. It is a drinking glass, and it is also a pipe for smokers. On a larger scale, it is a bucket for carrying water, and the receptacle for all liquid and solid provisions. When provided with a handle it serves as a pot for the Laotians to cook their rice in, or to prepare syrup from the sugar palm. When torn into thongs it is used as rope and string. Ligatures of sapeks are threaded on kelates, or bamboo filaments, and this is what makes our new Indo-Chinese sou, with its round hole in the middle, so impractical. Those who preside over the striking of our coins are unaware that the kelate is square, a fact which the first comer from the interior could have told them. Baskets of all kinds are made with these same kelates for holding and transporting material. Hats are also made of them to provide shelter from the sun and rain. At night, when the stage of your journey is too long and you have to continue after nightfall even at the risk of meeting a tiger, setting fire to a bamboo branch is enough to frighten any off and to light your way. And not only is bamboo used to make torches, hats, string, dishes, furniture, houses and bridges, but it also serves as animal fodder and even as food for the natives, who eat the tenderest shoots as we would eat asparagus.